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CIA's Laotian irregulars used World Medical Relief

CLEVELAND

Supplies from a charity, World Medical Relief Inc. of Detroit, helped maintain the Central Intelligence Agency's secret army in Laos, The Cleveland Plain Dealer has charged in a copyright report.

Harry C. Aderholt, a retired Air Force Brigadier general, and Daniel Arnold, a retired CIA chief of station in Thailand and Laos, acknowledged they served as Southeast Asian conduits for millions of dollars of World Medical Relief assistance while in government service, the newspaper said Wednesday.

It said it learned that World Medical Relief assistance was funneled to Hmong, or Meo, tribesmen through a distribution chain that included Air Force Commandos and Edgar "Mr. Pop" Buell, a U.S. official who helped organize and train Hmong soldiers.

According to congressional reports, the CIA secretly equipped, trained and helped supply its own private army of 30,000 Laotian irregulars, originally consisting mostly of Hmong tribesmen. During the late 1960s, the private army was used in covert military operations against the Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese invaders.

World Medical Relief, headquartered in an eight-story brick warehouse in Detroit, is known to missionaries and doctors around the world as a lifeline of medical supplies for the needy, The Plain Dealer said.

The newspaper said World Medical Relief, a federally tax-exempt organization, said it runs a "non-political, non-government medical relief program ... dedicated to the service of God's sick poor."

The charity's 86-year-old founder and president, Irene Auberlin, was quoted as saying "We're strictly medical. We equip hospitals and clinics for missionaries. We don't get involved with governments."

Tax laws under which corporations donate goods to World Medical Relief, receiving write-offs, require that donations be used only for the needy.

The Plain Dealer said Aderholt, who headed the 1st Air Commandos, at first hesitated to discuss the role World Medical Relief played in supplying the Laotians. But it said he later acknowledged the support from the charity.

"I administered all the (World Medical Relief) programs ... in Laos, through Doc (Charles) Weldon, who was a very famous doctor up there, and Pop Buell ... He led the Meo," he was quoted as saying.

The newspaper said Arnold, who replaced Aderholt as the charity's prime distributor in Thailand in 1976, also confirmed World Medical Relief's supply line to the Hmong.

It said that during an interview in Washington, D.C., last July, Arnold was asked if Hmong tribesmen received World Medical Relief supplies while fighting Communist forces.

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"That is correct, yes," it quoted him as responding. But it said he later said the supplies only went to Hmong refugees inside Laos.

Aderholt was also quoted as saying World Medical Relief supplies were distributed by the U.S. military in South America when he was with the 1st Air Commandos.

"We flew stuff... to the Canal Zone and then distributed it down in South America," he was quoted as saying, explaining that Air Force commando units "administered a lot of the medicines down there in the civic action programs."

Civil action programs were part of the U.S. government's foreign counterinsurgency program, the newspaper said.

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